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The current influence of the CEFR in secondary education: teachers' perceptions

María Belén Díez-Bedmar¹ and Michael Byram²

¹*Department of English Studies, University of Jaén, Spain*

²*Universities of Durham and Luxembourg*

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) began to have an influence on language teaching some 20 years ago. However, in spite of the title referring to learning, teaching and assessment of languages, the CEFR has had a far more pronounced impact on language testing than on any other aspect of language learning/teaching. In contrast, this article focuses on the impact of the CEFR on teachers by analysing the beliefs about and perceptions of the CEFR held by a group of Spanish teachers about to take a Masters course module on the CEFR. A 35-item questionnaire was administered to these in-service teachers online to analyse their familiarity with the CEFR, their perceptions of the impact of the CEFR and their knowledge of the contents of the CEFR. The analysis shows that teachers' degree of familiarity with the CEFR as a whole was superficial. They reported a high degree of familiarity with levels of competences, but limited knowledge of changes that the CEFR proposes, despite the fact that they perceived the general impact of the CEFR on syllabi, curricula and methods to be substantial. There are clear implications for teacher education to ensure more thorough understanding of the CEFR.

Keywords: CEFR; teacher thinking; secondary education; in-service teachers; curriculum

1. Introduction

It is approximately two decades since the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching Assessment* appeared in professional circles, with a consultation on the first draft with some 2000 professionals in 1996 (Trim, 2007). It was published to provide “a common basis for the elaboration of language syllabuses, curriculum guidelines, examinations, textbooks, etc. across Europe” (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 1), and consists of descriptions of processes of language learning, teaching and assessment and,

perhaps most widely known, descriptors of language competences in six levels. A ‘final’ version was published commercially in 2001 in France and Britain, in the two official languages of the Council of Europe. Since then some 40 translations have been produced and the document is known around the world as well as in Europe, for which it was originally destined. Its influence among those who create and develop curricula is indisputable (Byram & Parmenter, 2012). That ‘final’ version has now been complemented by a *Companion Volume with New Descriptors* published in September 2017, which is itself ‘provisional’ suggesting that the CEFR will continue to be updated and improved (Council of Europe, 2017).

Despite its worldwide influence, the question remains how well known the CEFR in its 2001 edition is among teachers and whether it influences them in their thinking and practice. The literature on this topic, as will be seen in Section 2, is limited so far, although it includes research from different countries in which the CEFR has had varying degrees of implementation. Furthermore, the few studies on in-service teachers’ knowledge of the CEFR do not describe in detail the teachers’ knowledge of the CEFR, which prevents a clear picture of the extent to which their knowledge is superficial or based on a good understanding of the CEFR. To bridge this gap in the literature, this paper shall analyse how a group of teachers taking a Masters course perceived and understood the *CEFR*, as a contribution to knowing more about its influence ‘on the ground’. The intention is that the results may inform pre-service and in-service teacher courses and the pertinent educational authorities to ensure that the CEFR is to be fully used in the classroom.

2. Literature review and analysis

The influence of the CEFR has been the object of studies in Europe and beyond. These have concentrated on the impact of the CEFR in policy-making, a matter of interest not least to the Council of Europe itself (Martyniuk & Noijens, 2007). Figueras (2012) suggests there are two

factors behind the impact. One is a geopolitical and scientific factor by which she means the need to make language teaching more practical and the need to create a common discourse about language teaching. The second factor is the change to positive descriptions of proficiency and a non-compulsory approach to the presentation of the contents of the *CEFR*. The first factor is a matter of policy and suggests that the document as a whole was necessary to stimulate change, whereas the second factor focuses on descriptors, just one part of the document, a dimension which is often taken for the whole, what Coste calls ‘reverse metonymy’ (2007), i.e. instead of ‘the part for the whole’ the whole represents only a part. The importance of descriptors is also reflected in the studies which focus on the impact on assessment processes including high stakes examinations (e.g. Figueras, North, Takala, Verhelst, & Van Avermaet, 2005; North, 2014). This pre-occupation with clarity in assessment is one indication of how the CEFR is above all perceived as offering a “comprehensive, coherent and transparent” (CEFR, 2001, p. 7) approach to describing proficiency in a foreign language. This is what has apparently made it attractive outside Europe too (e.g. Zheng, Zhang, & Yan, 2016).

Studies of the impact of the CEFR on teachers’ practices are on the other hand less frequent. Little (2011, p. 383) argues that ‘The overwhelming tendency to make only partial use of CEFR means that it has the least impact where it should make the greatest difference: in the L2 classroom.’ Moonen, Stoutjesdijk, Graaf and Corda’s (2013) study of the impact of the CEFR on teachers’ practices cites no previous empirical work. They do not mention Nagai and O’Dwyer (2011), who give an account of changes in Japanese university teaching influenced by the CEFR but whose empirical basis is limited to informal case studies. Moonen et al.’s (2013) study is also limited in scope, dealing only with Dutch schools, but their conclusion may well be relevant wherever the CEFR is well established in the thinking and practices of an education system because in this case the Dutch government had

introduced a very determined effort to make the CEFR known and used. They conclude, with respect to the ‘micro-level’ of the individual teachers, that the teachers they studied have a basic understanding of the CEFR but make limited and selective use of it with a focus on the immediate needs of the users, and are helped by what they find in textbooks. They finish on an optimistic note suggesting that the teachers they surveyed who were not yet using the CEFR had intentions to do so in the future.

There is however a stage before implementation and changes in practices which is even less frequently analysed, namely the perceptions teachers have of the CEFR even before they are involved in implementation. Strangely, Moonen et al. (2013) include this topic in their list of research questions but do not actually address it in their study, nor give any reason why it is omitted. North (2008, p. 56), without citing any sources, argues that: ‘Teachers’ view of the CEFR tends to be oversimplified, confusing it with the European Language Portfolio and focusing on the six levels’. One small-scale study in Australian universities (Normand-Maconnet, & Lo Bianco, 2013) shows that 66% of the 73 students and 62 staff they surveyed were familiar with the CEFR and 60% were aware of ‘Common Reference Levels’. They conclude that there was ‘a lack of enthusiasm and closed-mindedness’ towards the CEFR although they anticipate that at policy level there could be attempts to use it in some way.

Another study, in Canada, (Faez, Majhanovich, Taylor, Smith, & Crowley, 2011) is similar to ours in that it analyses the perceptions of teachers on an in-service course. This study also used a pre-study questionnaire, as the present study did, eliciting attitudes to communicative and task-based teaching. However, Faez et al. (2011) do not report the pre-course perceptions as this study does below, but focus on the consensus, after the programme, that the advantages of using the CEFR include enhanced learner autonomy and motivation,

more authentic language use and oral ability and encourages positive self-assessment for use formatively and summatively.

The CEFR has also been the subject of doctoral research. Valax (2011) analyses questionnaire responses from small groups of teachers in Australia, France, New Zealand, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and the UK where less than a third of the respondents had knowledge of the CEFR itself. Yet in 76% of cases they gave views on its usefulness, which as Valax says (2011) may not be based on direct familiarity with the CEFR. This does not necessarily mean self-contradiction since the CEFR is mediated in various modes, including textbooks and in-service courses. Again, it is worth noting that whereas our study addressed teachers in secondary education these were teachers in tertiary education.

In contrast, Figueras (2013) surveyed several different types of user, including primary, tertiary and secondary teachers. This is particularly interesting since the work took place in Spain like ours. Figueras (2013) too finds that teachers expressed views about the CEFR without necessarily knowing the document itself. 72% of her 109 respondents from primary and secondary sectors said they had good or very good knowledge of the CEFR, 76% saying it is useful, but only 17% saying they had read the document itself. Their knowledge came from other sources such as training sessions and reading about the CEFR rather than reading the text itself. The sample in this case was drawn from the members of an association of English language teachers in Catalonia. The participants' involvement in the association probably indicates that they represent teachers with strong commitment to their profession. Others may know less or have different perceptions.

Finally a master's thesis study of 35 in-service teachers in Andalusia comes to a similar conclusion to that of Figueras's (2013) study in Catalonia, saying that teachers in both regions say they are familiar with the CEFR, but less so with the European Language Portfolio and in some cases have learnt about the CEFR in training courses (Castillo Molina,

2015). There is however one difference in that Andalusian teachers believed that textbooks and curricula are influenced by the CEFR whereas Catalan teachers did not.

As this literature review shows, there is little research on how teachers perceive the CEFR or what they know about it, and what does exist is based on small samples, usually created on an opportunity basis. The efforts of researchers have been focused on impact studies at policy and classroom level, but without considering the large numbers of teachers not involved in processes of implementation. Yet we contend that implementation on a wide scale will be dependent on what teachers already know or think of the CEFR and it is important to investigate this first. Only in this way will it be possible to know the teachers' perceptions of the CEFR and prepare pre-service and in-service courses or materials which will help them have a clear and comprehensive view of the CEFR to make sure the philosophy behind the CEFR is observed and understood in the L2 classroom. For this reason, this paper analyses the teachers' actual knowledge of the CEFR by focusing on three main research questions:

1. To what extent are teachers familiar with the CEFR?
2. What is the impact of the CEFR nowadays in teachers' opinions?
3. What are the contents in the CEFR according to teachers?

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

The participants in this study were students who were to begin an module focused on the CEFR which was part of an on-line Masters course, *Conceptual Frameworks for Language Teaching: the CEFR* in the *Online Master in English Studies (OMiES)*, at the University of Jaén, Spain.

The students were required to complete the questionnaire before they began the module and 59 students did so. However, due to their different profiles and in order not to bias the results, only those who were teachers, 44 participants, were selected for this study (others were people not yet engaged in teaching although with an intention to be so). Their ages ranged between 24 and 43 years, the mean being 32 ($SD= 4.9$), and the number of years of their teaching experience was varied ($M= 4.59$, $SD= 3.9$), as one teacher had been teaching for 1 year, whereas another teacher had been working for 18 years. Most of the participants were female (81.8% of the total sample).

These in-service teachers will have taken either the MA in Teacher Training for Secondary Education or the previous equivalent course, depending on when they finished their BA and decided to prepare for the state examination to qualify as teachers. In-service teachers are thus likely to have learnt the basics about the CEFR from such pre-service courses, any in-service courses they may take in a *Centro de Profesores* or other institutions, or at conferences. They may also have experienced its use in their teaching practice. However, the inclusion of courses focused on the CEFR in BA, MA or short in-service courses is not common practice. Knowing what teachers really know about the CEFR is, therefore, crucial in order to determine whether curricula to prepare teachers are adequate or if a course on the CEFR and its applications in the classroom is necessary.

3.2. The questionnaire

A questionnaire was devised by the authors after considering the studies analysed in the previous section. It is divided into four main sections (see Appendix 1). The first section (items 1 to 4) is demographic and asks for personal and academic background information of the participants. The second section (items 5 to 12) was designed to obtain information on the teachers' familiarity with the CEFR. The third section (items 13 to 19) focused on the participants' perception of the impact of the CEFR and, finally, the fourth section (items 20-

25) was devoted to eliciting participants' knowledge of the contents of the CEFR. A combination of question types was used: yes/no questions, statements with Likert-scale responses, and sentences to complete.

The questionnaire was available in English and Spanish before the beginning of the course, on the virtual platform through which the MA course was taught in November 2016. The participants could decide whether to answer the Spanish or the English version so that language was not a problem in the understanding of the questions or the formulation of their answers. Once they completed the questionnaire, they could access the contents of the course.

The data obtained in the questionnaires were analysed with descriptive statistics to analyse in-service teachers' perceptions of the influence of the CEFR in secondary education. We did not consider it necessary to use inferential statistics to analyse differences by gender or age or similar factors.

4. Results

This section will be divided into three main sections, corresponding to the three research questions established at the end of Section 2. The first section will describe the teachers' familiarity with the CEFR, the second one the perceived impact of the CEFR, whereas the third one will focus on their knowledge of the contents in the CEFR.

4.1. Teachers' familiarity with the CEFR

Defining the CEFR

When asked if they had ever seen a copy of the CEFR, 86.4% (38 teachers) affirmed they had, but only 70.5% of the total sample (31 teachers) had read one or more parts of it. Out of those, one teacher stated that she had read the whole document, as the CEFR was the topic of her BA dissertation. Most of the other teachers had just browsed the document searching for the

‘hot topics’, namely the ‘levels’ (12 teachers), ‘competences/competencies’ (5), ‘descriptor/s’ (5), ‘assessment/evaluation’ (4), the portfolio (2) – which is in fact another document – and ‘teaching’ (2). A crucial aspect such as ‘plurilingualism’ was only referred to once, which was striking due to the importance of plurilingualism nowadays, its importance in the CEFR, and its strong presence in the new *Companion Volume*. The analysis of the hot topics reveals that the teachers may have approached the document as students, rather than as teachers, as they seemed to be more interested in assessment than in different aspects of teaching..

If the data on the teachers’ first-hand experience with the CEFR is compared with previous studies, this group had much more direct, personal knowledge of the CEFR. Figueras’s (2013) study in Catalonia reported that only 17% of the sample had read the CEFR; she did not give details of how much and which parts they had read. The previous study by Castillo Molina (2015) in Andalusia did not ask if the respondents had read the CEFR, only if they were familiar with it; 78.6% of the 35 teachers in the sample said they were familiar with the CEFR. In Valax’s (2011) study of university teachers with a small but international sample, 30.56% had ‘read the CEFR’ – without specifying how much – and 9.26% said they had read nothing about the CEFR; the remaining respondents reported reading about the CEFR in various kinds of document.

The places where these teachers first heard about the CEFR varied: a substantial group (14) referred to their teachers in the *academia de oposiciones*, which are the private academies pre-service teachers attend to train to pass the official state exam to become secondary school teachers. Another group remembered hearing about the CEFR in their university studies: Bachelors (10) or Masters (7). These results show, at least, that the CEFR is explicitly mentioned in the preparatory courses to pass the exam to become a teacher, probably because it is mentioned in the Spanish legislation. However, the results also show

that the CEFR is mentioned in BA courses too, and may be a topic of interest among the staff teaching such courses.

However, these varied sources in our teachers' answers corresponded with the sources of knowledge cited in Figueras (2013), although in her study there was a stronger position for in-service courses as a source. This may be the result of the administration of the survey to teachers in a teaching association which promotes this type of course.

The teachers were also asked to define the CEFR by completing 'The CEFR is...' in item 10 in the questionnaire. Although some teachers just provided the term in full, i.e., Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, or simply wrote 'a document', 36 teachers (81.8%) provided a definition. The qualitative analysis of these definitions reflected the teachers' emphasis on different aspects of the CEFR, which may be divided into five main categories: a) those which included the role of social agents (5); b) those which highlighted the CEFR as a tool (3); c) the ones which consider the CEFR as a document which regulates the teaching of languages in the European Union (1); d) the definitions which focused on the CEFR as a standard or guideline (23); and e) the definitions which did not mention the CEFR as a standard, guideline or framework, but focused on the levels together with other aspects in the CEFR (4). The analysis of the definitions also revealed some misconceptions, such as the misperceived role of the CEFR as a document which regulates the teaching of languages in the European Union:

- (1) 'the framework which regulates the teaching of languages within the European Union' (translated from Spanish).

The teachers' definitions of the CEFR shows that there is a complex situation where some teachers have richer understandings than others, which contradicts North's (2008) (unsupported) assertion that teachers' views of the CEFR tend to be 'oversimplified'. Perhaps

the interceding years have made a difference, but it is not possible to make comparisons without data. It is also possible that the different foci of the definitions stem from the participants' experience with the document: some teachers may have heard of the levels because of their own need to obtain an official language certificate at a CEFR level. Some others may have tried to design exams with other colleagues to assess different skills, or yet others may have consulted the CEFR to look for information on the different competence types. Whatever the case, it is clear that teachers are in need of a comprehensive understanding of the CEFR, including the aspects related to teaching, learning and assessment. It is also crucial to highlight here that 18.2% of the sample did not even attempt a definition, which may suggest they would benefit from an overview of the whole document. It is also clear that teachers may have had different first-hand experiences with the Framework, which shapes their understanding of the document, and that it is crucial to obtain this type of information before planning a course or materials to help them obtain a comprehensive view of the CEFR and its implications in the FL classroom.

Characterizing the CEFR

After having provided their definitions of the CEFR, the teachers were asked for the six keywords which would define it. Figure 1 shows the most frequently used words

INSERT FIGURE 1

Figure 1. Keywords used by the teachers to refer to the CEFR (frequency ≥ 4)

Among the terms which are mentioned less than four times, crucial aspects such as 'plurilingualism' and 'mediation' were only mentioned by two teachers. This might indicate that these concepts were not well developed in the CEFR in its 2001 edition and that the new

strong emphasis in the *Companion Volume* is justified and could lead to different perceptions in the future. Similarly, important concepts to characterize the CEFR such as ‘recommendation’ and ‘transparent’/‘transparency’ were only used once and twice respectively.

As for the places where the teachers had seen references made to the CEFR (see Figure 2), most of them referred to teaching materials/textbooks (31) employed in the classrooms as well as the syllabi (19) they use in the classroom or the ones they had to prepare to take the official state exam to become secondary school teachers (*oposiciones*).

INSERT FIGURE 2

Figure 2. Places where teachers have found references to the CEFR

These results show that there are two aspects which make teachers aware of the reference made to the CEFR in textbooks, syllabi, curricula and commercial examinations (the four most frequent responses in this item of the questionnaire). First, the teachers’ need to obtain a certain certificate to become a language teacher. The second factor is the inclusion of reference to the CEFR in the legislation on the teaching of foreign languages in secondary schools. Although the efforts of the Spanish Ministry of Education are not equivalent to those of the Dutch government reported in Moonen et al. (2013), it can be clearly seen that such institutional decisions play an important role in the teachers’ familiarization with the CEFR. On the other hand, teachers reported that they had not heard the CEFR mentioned in conferences, workshops, or in some cases even the legislation. This shows that some teachers’ academic understanding of the CEFR may be limited, even regarding the legislation which regulates the teaching of foreign languages in Spain. In such cases, teachers’ limited first-

hand experience with the legislation is worrying as they seem to know about it and the CEFR only via other documents.

4.2. Perceived impact of the CEFR

The first point to note is that half of the teachers (52.3%) thought that the CEFR is obligatory for all European countries and most of the teachers (93.2%) agreed that it has influenced the educational policy in their context. This is a much higher percentage than Valax (2011) found, as 36.1% of his sample said the CEFR is used in their country – with 35.2% saying they did not know – and 30.6% said it was used in their institution, with 21.3% saying they did not know. Valax's (2011) respondents were however mainly from outside Europe and this no doubt accounts for the lower perceived impact.

Further information was requested regarding the *degree* of influence that the CEFR has exerted on the syllabus, the methods, the textbooks and the exams. This was addressed by asking participants to rank on a 1-5 Likert scale – with 1 as minimum and 5 as maximum – the sentences in Figure 3.¹

The mode in every aspect analysed is 4, although differences can be seen. As seen in Figure 3, most of the teachers (72.7%) thought that the CEFR influences the syllabus strongly (4 or 5 on the Likert scale), and then in descending order: the methods employed (70.5%), the textbooks (65.9%), and exams (59%). This result may show the teachers first-hand experience with syllabus design when they trained to become school teachers, as they are required to produce a syllabus in the state exam to become secondary school teachers.

INSERT FIGURE 3

Figure 3. Teachers' perceived opinions on the impact of the CEFR on exams, textbooks, methods and syllabus

When giving teachers the opportunity to indicate their perception of the aspects through which the CEFR has been influential, the results revealed nine main aspects, namely, the levels, assessment or evaluation, skills, official certifications, B1 level, textbooks or teaching materials, communication, syllabuses, examinations and competences (in descending order of influence). Each aspect is now described in detail.

First, the ‘levels’ were the most frequently mentioned aspect (10 teachers). Although most teachers mentioned only the levels in their replies, three teachers further elaborated on the way in which the CEFR has been influential on levels generally and referred to the influence of the CEFR on the classification of levels, the relation between assessment and levels and the contents per level. The second aspect on which teachers consider the CEFR has been influential is ‘Assessment’ or ‘evaluation’ (8 teachers), although only two teachers explained how assessment has been influenced: one of them explained that the CEFR is mentioned as the way to assess foreign languages in the Spanish education law and the second teacher referred to the ‘evaluation’ of the different skills (as opposed to one skill). In fact, skill/s were also highlighted as having been influenced by the CEFR (7 teachers). Official certifications were also mentioned (6 teachers) to highlight the importance of language certifications nowadays. Closely related to this influence of the CEFR, the importance of CEFR B1 level was highlighted (5 teachers), as it is the most commonly required level to finish a Bachelors in Andalucía, although the situation varies in different regions (Sierra, 2011). Likewise, the influence of the CEFR on textbooks or teaching materials was also highlighted (5 teachers).

The influence of the CEFR on the contents of syllabuses was also referred to (4 teachers), as the way in which contents have been divided into blocks or levels, and the relation between the contents and the objectives were commented on. Examinations were also present in 4 responses, paying special attention to the design of exams and the relation

between exams and skills. Competence or competences were also found on 4 occasions (two of them when speaking about communicative competence, as seen above).

Most teachers did not expand on their answers. It may be inferred that their perceptions of the impact of the CEFR are superficial, without really understating how the above-mentioned aspects have been influenced by the CEFR. It is striking to see that, contrary to their ranking of the perceived influence of some aspects in the previous item, they highlight here the syllabus and assessment, whereas exams are reported to be the ones having received the lowest influence from the CEFR.

The only research with which these results can be compared is that by Valax (2011). Valax's (2011) study also revealed that perceived impact on examinations is low but again this is probably a consequence of his sample being mainly from outside Europe. Taking a less nuanced approach, Figueras found the perceived impact or influence to be low in general. The majority (71%) of secondary school teachers in her sample thought that the CFR is reflected in the official curriculum 'only a bit' or 'not really', and two thirds of the same group (67%) thought it affected their teaching 'only a bit' or 'not really'. Primary school teachers in her study had much the same perceptions with the exception that 56% said that the CEFR 'had actually affected their teaching'.

4.3. Contents of the CEFR

This is a dimension of this study which has not been addressed in previous research.

First, teachers were provided with seven possible elements of the CEFR for them to tick those which they considered were included in the CEFR; to check whether teachers just ticked some of the elements without paying attention to what they read, some elements which are not in the CEFR were added. The results obtained were that, in decreasing percentage order, the elements identified as being in the CEFR were: a number of levels to describe students' competences in the foreign language (97.7%), suggestions for assessment (93.1%), a

list of competences and strategies (84.3%), and suggestions for teaching methods (75%). Lower percentages referred to other features they thought the CEFR includes, namely a description of how people learn languages (34.1%), a curriculum for specific languages (27.4%) and a syllabus for teaching methods (20.4%).

The teachers were then given the opportunity to write their own list of what is included in the CEFR. The results range from one teacher who detailed the table of contents in the CEFR (probably just copied from the book), to the teachers who mentioned only a few elements. The most frequently mentioned were the ‘levels’ (11), ‘types’ (8), ‘competence/s’ (8), ‘assessment’ (8), ‘teaching’ (6), ‘language’ (5) and ‘learning’ (5). Among the words which appeared on fewer occasions, ‘communication/communicative’, a concept which is surely dominant in the CEFR and ‘tasks’ which is again a crucial element of the CEFR approach, only appeared twice.

The teachers’ degree of familiarity with the main elements of the CEFR, namely, the levels, the action-oriented approach, and the main changes introduced in the CEFR, were also explored (see Figure 3). Due to the importance of the Portfolio, which accompanied the CEFR, the participants’ familiarity with this document was also explored.

Considering the percentage of teachers who chose 4 or 5 on the Likert scale to rank their degree of familiarity with the above-mentioned aspects, the most well-known aspects of the CEFR were, in decreasing order, the levels (75%), the Portfolio (38.6%), the changes involved (34.1%) and the action-oriented approach (27.3%).

A close analysis of the teachers’ responses gave more depth to our understanding of the degree of familiarity with these various issues. With respect to the levels, only one teacher (2.3%) said that they did not know the levels, and 3 teachers admitted that they only knew a bit about them (6.8%). In the case of the Portfolio, a limited number of teachers recognised

either that they did not know anything about the Portfolio (2, 9.1%), or that they were slightly familiar with it (6, 13.6%).

A different scenario was found in the teachers' familiarity with the action-oriented approach, with which teachers were less familiar. Only 27.3% of them considered their degree of familiarity to be high (9 teachers, 20.5%) or very high (3 teachers, 6.8%), as opposed to 25% of the teachers who confirmed that their degree of familiarity was either non-existent (5 teachers, 11.4%) or very limited (6, 13.6%). Likewise, the teachers' familiarity with the main changes was 'high' for only 11 teachers (25%) or very high for 4 (9.1%). At the other extreme, 4 teachers (9.1%) and 9 teachers (20.5%) stated that they did not know anything about the main changes in the CEFR or knew little about them, respectively.

If the percentages of the teachers who recognized not knowing anything about specific elements of the CEFR or about the Portfolio (1 on the Likert scale) and those who admitted they knew little about it (2 on the Likert scale) are considered together, it is evident that some teachers did not know anything substantial about the main changes that the CEFR involves or the action-oriented approach, whereas that is not the case with the Portfolio and the levels. Therefore, the main changes which need to be implemented in the classroom if the CEFR is to be fully implemented are not known by a substantial number of teachers. Further explanation of the CEFR to teachers is crucial.

INSERT FIGURE 4

Figure 4. Teachers' degree of familiarity with the levels, the action-oriented approach, the Portfolio and the changes involved in the CEFR

5. Discussion

Among the results obtained, it is striking to see that most of the teachers have just browsed the document to look for information on the levels, competences, descriptors or assessment,

and the definitions teachers provide may reflect the type of experience they have had with the CEFR. The levels in the CEFR remain the most widely-known aspect, to the detriment of other crucial aspects such as the notions of plurilingualism, transparency, curriculum design, or learner profiles. Ideas such as ‘culture’, ‘interculturality’, ‘curriculum’, ‘syllabus’ or ‘tasks’ were only mentioned once when characterizing the CEFR, despite their importance in teachers’ daily work. As pointed out in Byram (2014), much is still to be done in pre- and in-service training regarding in particular how they include a cultural dimension in their teaching.

There are also some worrying general mis-perceptions of the CEFR. Half of the teachers think the CEFR is obligatory for all European countries; some teachers look for information on the Portfolio in the CEFR; others think the CEFR includes a description of how people learn languages, or a curriculum for specific languages, or a syllabus for teaching methods, etc. In short, the teachers seem to only have a superficial knowledge of the CEFR, guided by their own experience as students (to obtain a particular CEFR level in a language) and their teacher training, , but without taking note of the innovative perspectives on language and learning which are present in the CEFR. It is no surprise, therefore, that most teachers agree that the degree of influence of the CEFR is higher in the syllabus, followed by the methods, the textbooks and the exams the students take in secondary education. Only the use of the Portfolio seems to be well-known by the participants of the study.

The participants’ limited knowledge of the philosophy behind the CEFR demands that education authorities foster training in the CEFR so that teachers can integrate into their daily practice the CEFR triad of teaching, learning and assessment in ways which follow the spirit of that philosophy.

Such training would need to shift the teachers’ experience with the CEFR from that of a student of the text to that of a teacher, who is in charge of its implementation in the

classroom. To do so, an overview of the CEFR and the Companion Volume is necessary so as to avoid students' superficial knowledge of the documents, as seen in their browsing of only some aspects (levels, competences, descriptors or assessment), and their lack of awareness of others (plurilingualism, transparency, curriculum design, or learner profiles). Ideas such as 'culture', 'interculturality', 'curriculum', 'syllabus' or 'tasks' were only mentioned once, and as pointed out in Byram (2014), much is still to be done regarding a cultural dimension of language teaching.

The influence of the CEFR on teaching, learning and assessment should also be considered in these courses, as most participants agree that the influence of the CEFR is higher in the syllabus, followed by the methods, the textbooks and the exams the students take in secondary education. This finding, no doubt, mirrors the current situation in Spain in which pre-service teachers need to design a syllabus for their state exam following the legislation (where the CEFR is mentioned), but without considering any impact the CEFR may have on other aspects of teaching, learning and assessment practice. Only the use of the Portfolio, which is fostered in some contexts, seems to be well-known by the participants of the study. Furthermore, general mis-perceptions of the CEFR should be clarified. Half of the teachers think the CEFR is obligatory for all European countries; some teachers look for information on the Portfolio in the CEFR; others think the CEFR includes a description of how people learn languages, or a curriculum for specific languages, or a syllabus for teaching methods, etc.

Although students' familiarity with the CEFR will determine in each context which issues are given prominence in training, it is clear that pre-service and in-service teachers do need training on the CEFR if it is to be properly implemented in the classrooms so that their learners benefit from the CEFR philosophy.

6. Conclusion

This study has described the perceptions of the CEFR among a group of 44 in-service secondary school teachers. If in-service teachers are to implement the CEFR appropriately on a daily basis, we have argued that it is crucial to analyse their perceptions regarding what the CEFR is, their familiarity with the document, their beliefs about the impact of the CEFR and their knowledge of its contents. Only by obtaining a close picture of what teachers believe, will it be possible to design pre-service or in-service courses in which teachers acquire an understanding of the CEFR which may be transferred to their teaching practice. As a starting point, we have discussed the main issues which should be considered in planning training derived from our results, although every situation would need careful preliminary analysis.

There are limitations in the results obtained in this study due to the number of participants and their contextualization (44 teachers in Spain). A more substantial survey is needed in the future (together with the use of semi-structured interviews), since this study like others is based on an opportunity sample. Instruments which are thoroughly validated beyond what was possible in this exploratory study are also needed. Nonetheless this study together with studies analysed above helps to build a nuanced picture across several countries. Furthermore the findings can be already used to raise the education authorities' awareness of the need to better train pre-service and in-service teachers to adapt their teaching and assessment of language to the CEFR.

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¹ Since the questionnaire was administered to all the students in the course (in-service and pre-service teachers as well as students interested in the CEFR), students who identified themselves as in-service teachers were asked to reply considering the practice in their own classes.